

Conveying expertise and competence in business reviews and strategic reports: a survey of persuasive linguistic means

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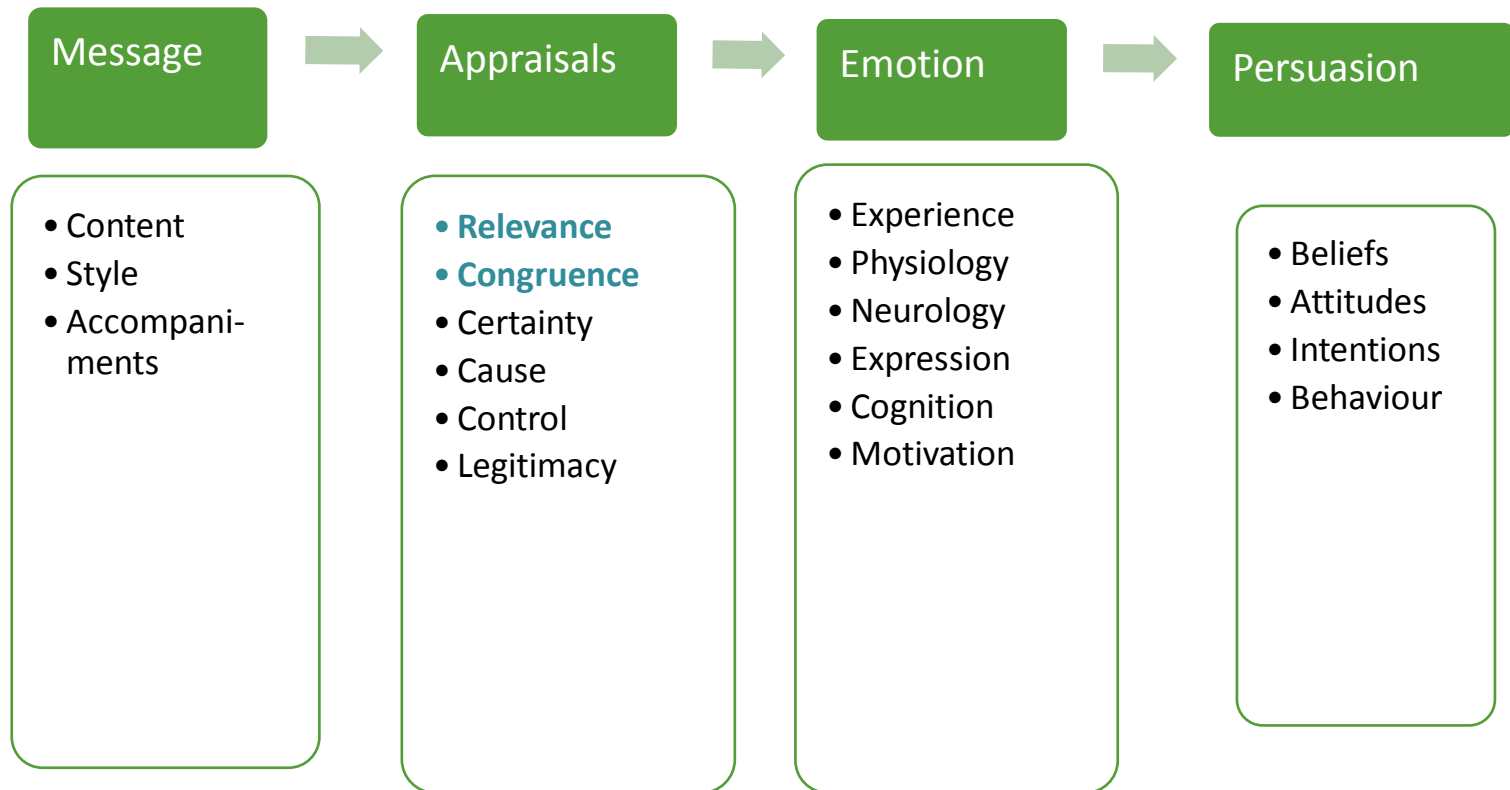
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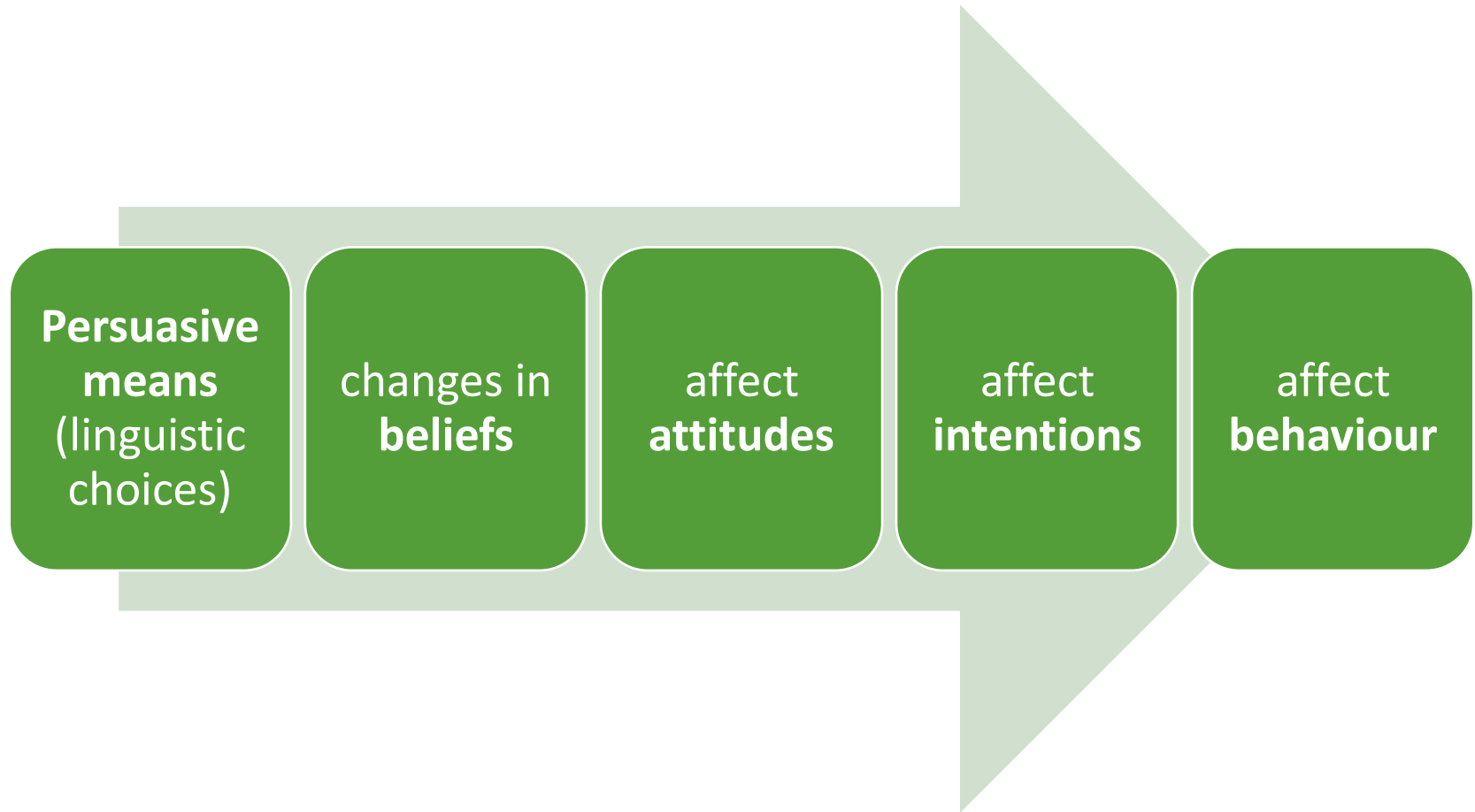
Persuasion and credibility

- **Credibility** – enhanced by expertise and trust.
- **Persuasion** – a language-mediated interactive intentional process, an essential part of human interaction, aimed at changing the thinking/attitudes and/or behaviour of an audience (Perloff 2010).
- Manifestation: **overtly** (linguistic choices) or **covertly** (rhetorical strategies) (Swales 1990).
- Appeals to **logic** and **reason** (systematic persuasion) or **emotions** (heuristic persuasion).
- Cognitive appraisal theories – linking **cognition** (i.e. appraisals) and particular **affective responses** (i.e. emotions) (Dillard & Seo 2013).

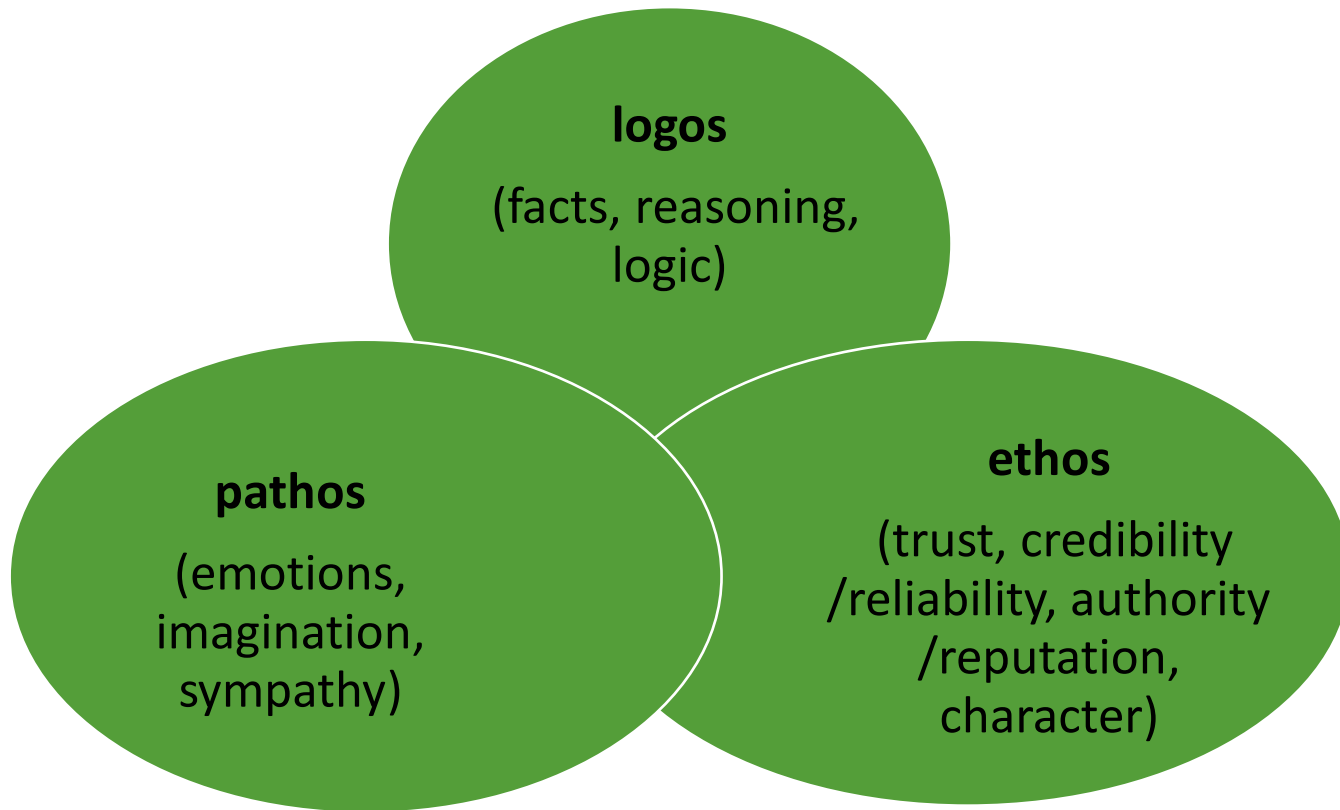
Appraisal Model of Persuasion (Dillard & Seo 2013:153)



Reasoned Action Theory (Yzer 2013)



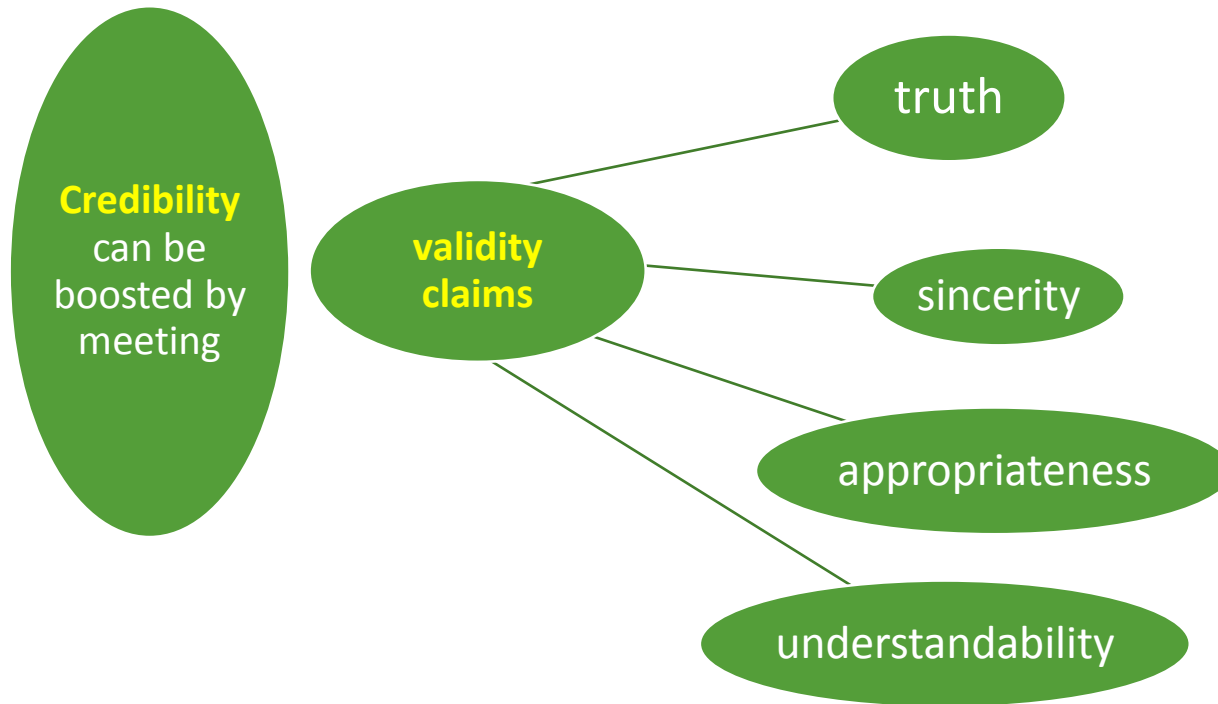
Aristotelian rhetorical appeals (Aristotle's rhetorical triangle, modes of persuasion)



Credibility

- Successful persuasion → credibility of the source and content.
- Credibility: **trustworthiness** (more subjective, reliability) and **expertise** (more objective).
- Speaker/writer (S/W) must establish **epistemic trust** and **epistemic vigilance** (Sperber et al. 2010).
- Epistemic vigilance – assesment of reliability of the **source** (S/W) and of the **content** (Dontcheva-Navrátilová 2011: 85), conditioned by **competence** and **benevolence** of the S/W (Sperber et al. 2010).

Theory of communicative action (Habermas 1984)



Persuasion in business (documents)

Persuaders must be:

objective, consistent and logical (= logos)

credible, authoritative and empathic (= ethos)

positive and appealing (= pathos)

Persuaders must not be imposing and pushy (= implicitness)

Persuasion as implicitness

- “Persuasion as implicit anchoring” – a model of persuasion (Östman in Halmari & Virtanen 2005: 21).
- Parameters: coherence, politeness, involvement.
- Involvement – three notions with negative associations: **propaganda** < **manipulation** < **persuasion**.
- Some linguistic elements are specifically geared towards implicit anchoring – they even lack propositional content (ibid.: 22).
- Implicit vs. explicit persuasion: “persuasion per se rarely leads to the desired result by the active persuder” (Bülow-Møller in Halmari and Virtanen 2005: 17).

Functional Attitude Theory

- Katz (1960): people develop attitudes to serve their goals (one attitude can serve more functions).
- 5 types of attitudes serving certain functions:
 - utilitarian
 - social-adjustive
 - value-expressive
 - ego-defensive
 - knowledge (Smith et al. 1956, Katz 1960)
- (Carpenter, Boster & Andrews 2013: 104-107)

Perception of message quality – a link to linguistic enhancement of credibility

- **Perceptions of message quality** mediate the relationship between the functional match of the message and the message acceptance (for social-adjustive and value-expressive functions). (Lavine & Snyder 1996)
- Hullett (2002): The extent to which the audience holds a value influences the extent to which a message targeting the value is viewed as relevant to the values associated with the audiences' attitudes, and this relevance "determines their subjective determination of the quality of the message". (qtd in Carpenter, Boster & Andrews 2013:115)
- → A space for a "linguistically marked behaviour" (Fowler 1991) targeted at the values and attitudes of the audience.

Persuasion in specialised discourses

- ▶ *Corpus of English and Czech Specialised Discourses* (abbrev. *CECSD*)
- ▶ English and Czech subcorpora.
- ▶ Specialised subcorpora: business, academic, technical, religious (each in Czech and English).
- ▶ English business subcorpus: 60 texts, 115,503 words; native, translated and parallel Anglophone ARs.
- ▶ Czech business subcorpus: 60 texts, 100,895 words.
- ▶ *Corpus of English Executive Letters in ARs_BUS_2018*: 25 texts, 38,089 words, 1,599 sentences.
- ▶ *Corpus of English Reviews in ARs_BUS_2018*: 15 texts, 37,492 words, 1,414 sentences.
- ▶ Analytic tool: **Sketch Engine** concordancer.
- ▶ → Corpus of English and Czech Specialised Discourses_BUSINESS_English.
Available at <https://ske.fi.muni.cz>

Annual report

- **Annual report** – a comprehensive summary of a company's activities in the preceding financial year.
- Published in print and/or available online.
- Target readers: stakeholders of the company (investors/shareholders, business partners, tax authority, customers/clients,...).
- **Typical structure:**
 - General information about a company
 - Chairperson's statement
 - Chief Executive Officer's statement
 - Market overview
 - Operating and financial review
 - Board of directors
 - Senior management information
 - Director's report
 - Independent auditor's report
 - Financial statements (balance sheet, income statement / profit and loss account, statement of changes in equity, cash flow statement)
 - Notes on the financial statements
 - Accounting policies

Persuasiveness of AR's genres

- Letters from executives in ARs
 - **explicit authorship** (unlike majority of business discourse),
 - direct address
 - personal appeal
 - **supported by facts** → increased credibility.
- Business review, market review, review of the year, strategic report, etc.
 - **evidence** (facts, figures, tables, graphs, examples),
 - highlighting managers' expertise and company's experience, strength, innovativeness,...

Texts from annual reports: examples

Texts from reviews, strategic reports (most of CECSD)

- **Foundations for future growth are built from our investment in engineering excellence**
- During the year, we committed resources in order to ensure we made significant progress across all key engineering programmes in 2016. The Trent 1000 TEN engine undertook its first test flight in March and received its European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) certification on 11 July. The Trent 1000 TEN will power all variants of the Boeing 787 Dreamliner family and will power the first flight of the 787-10 in 2017. In November, the latest version of the Trent XWB, the higher thrust engine, successfully powered the first flight of the Airbus A350-1000 in Toulouse. The Trent 7000 engine, which will exclusively power the Airbus A330neo, undertook ground testing for the first time and we started assembly of the first flight test engines. In respect of future technologies, the Advance3 large engine demonstrator is proceeding well. The engine will test the new core architecture for future engine families and other key technologies such as lean burn combustion, ceramic matrix composites (CMC), CastBond (specialist turbine manufacturing) plus additive layer manufacturing (or 3D printing).
- (Rolls Royce, *Annual Report 2016*)

Letters from executives (CEELAR)

- Dear Fellow Shareholders:
- 2016 was an eventful year for our company, our country and the world. As the year progressed from a first half defined by economic anxiety and volatility to a second half impacted by a series of political upsets and surprises, we demonstrated the power and resilience of Citi's unique global franchise by helping our millions of customers and clients around the world navigate an environment far more challenging than anticipated.
- The nearly \$15 billion in net income we earned in 2016 is a reflection of the momentum we built across many of our core businesses while continuing to make the investments necessary for future growth. Among the many milestones we marked on the road to achieving our ultimate goal of being an indisputably strong and stable institution, I'd like to highlight the following:
- In our Global Consumer Bank, we continued to focus our footprint with the announcement of plans to divest our retail banking and credit card businesses in Argentina, Brazil and Colombia, strategic decisions that enable us to consolidate our finite resources on our three major consumer markets: the U.S., Mexico and Asia. In the U.S., we converted 11 million Costco customers to our platform over a weekend in June while adding an additional 1 million new cardholders in the next six months.
- (Citi, *Annual Report 2016*, Letter to Shareholders)

Purposeful linguistic choices

- Linguistic choices are intentionally determined by the speaker/writer → aimed at conveying specific messages (Van Dijk 1993: 261).
- Purposeful selection of lexical and grammatical devices → **moderation x strengthening of propositions** → persuasive effect.
- **Selection** of one language item implies the **exclusion** of some others (Fairclough 1995: 210).

Linguistic tools for persuasive messages

- Positive evaluative adjectives and adverbs (*new, strong, original, fast*).
- Superlative adjectives and adverbs (*best, unique, latest, first, complete*).
- Strong, vivid, dynamic, unrestricted verbs, nouns and adjectives (*impact, performance, progress, maintain, exceed, exclusive, prime*).
- Words with generally positive connotations (*innovative, commitment, opportunity, achieve, growth, service*) (cf. emotional appeals in advertising, Pollay 1983).
- Marconi (2004: 81): A positive image of a company cannot be a lie, it is based on facts; the company cannot harm its reputation.
- Language means contribute to the persuasive effect, but they do not achieve it by themselves.

Positive vs. negative words (*CECSD* - complete Anglophone business corpus)

Words with generally positive connotations			Words with generally negative connotations		
Word (<i>word class</i>)	Rate of occurrence (in the corpus)	Rate of occurrence (per 1 million)	Word (<i>word class</i>)	Rate of occurrence (in the corpus)	Rate of occurrence (per 1 million)
commitment (<i>n</i>)	64	479.65	negligence (<i>n</i>)	0	0
opportunity (<i>n</i>)	97	726.97	threat (<i>n</i>)	4	29.98
profit (<i>n,v</i>)	80	599.56	loss (<i>n</i>)	100	749.45
effective (<i>adj</i>)	39	292.29	ineffective (<i>adj</i>)	1	7.49
innovative (<i>adj</i>)	31	232.33	conservative (<i>adj</i>)	4	29.98
new (<i>adj</i>)	440	3,297.58	old (<i>adj</i>)	14	104.92
outstanding (<i>adj</i>)	15	112.42	poor (<i>adj</i>)	2	14.99
stable (<i>adj</i>)	19	142.40	volatile (<i>adj</i>)	10	74.95
successful (<i>adj</i>)	37	277.30	unsuccessful (<i>adj</i>)	0	0
updated (<i>adj</i>)	11	82.44	unchanged (<i>adj</i>)	11	82.44
promptly (<i>adv</i>)	6	44.97	slowly (<i>adv</i>)	2	14.99
achieve (<i>v</i>)	60	446.7	miss (<i>v</i>)	0	0
approve (<i>v</i>)	12	89.93	reject (<i>v</i>)	1	7.49
strengthen (<i>v</i>)	28	209.85	weaken (<i>v</i>)	3	22.48
succeed (<i>v</i>)	6	44.97	fail (<i>v</i>)	6	44.97
Total / corpus	945	N/A	Total / corpus	158	N/A

Tab. 1. Rates of occurrence of words with generally positive vs. words with generally negative connotations in the English business subcorpus of *CECSD*.

Positive vs. negative words (subcorpus *CEELAR* = Anglophone letters from executives)

Words with generally positive connotations			Words with generally negative connotations		
Word (<i>word class</i>)	Rate of occurrence (in the corpus)	Rate of occurrence (per 1 million)	Word (<i>word class</i>)	Rate of occurrence (in the corpus)	Rate of occurrence (per 1 million)
commitment (<i>n</i>)	35	808.54	negligence (<i>n</i>)	0	0
opportunity (<i>n</i>)	56	1293.66	threat (<i>n</i>)	4	92.4
profit (<i>n,v</i>)	22	508.22	loss (<i>n</i>)	7	161.71
effective (<i>adj</i>)	8	184.81	ineffective (<i>adj</i>)	0	0
innovative (<i>adj</i>)	5	115.51	conservative (<i>adj</i>)	2	46.2
new (<i>adj</i>)	141	3257.25	old (<i>adj</i>)	1	23.1
outstanding (<i>adj</i>)	5	115.51	poor (<i>adj</i>)	0	0
stable (<i>adj</i>)	3	69.3	volatile (<i>adj</i>)	6	138.61
successful (<i>adj</i>)	23	531.33	unsuccessful (<i>adj</i>)	0	0
updated (<i>adj</i>)	4	92.4	unchanged (<i>adj</i>)	1	23.1
promptly (<i>adv</i>)	1	23.1	slowly (<i>adv</i>)	0	0
achieve (<i>v</i>)	33	762.34	miss (<i>v</i>)	0	0
approve (<i>v</i>)	6	138.61	reject (<i>v</i>)	0	0
strengthen (<i>v</i>)	19	438.92	weaken (<i>v</i>)	0	0
succeed (<i>v</i>)	6	138.61	fail (<i>v</i>)	0	0
Total / corpus	367	N/A	Total / corpus	21	N/A

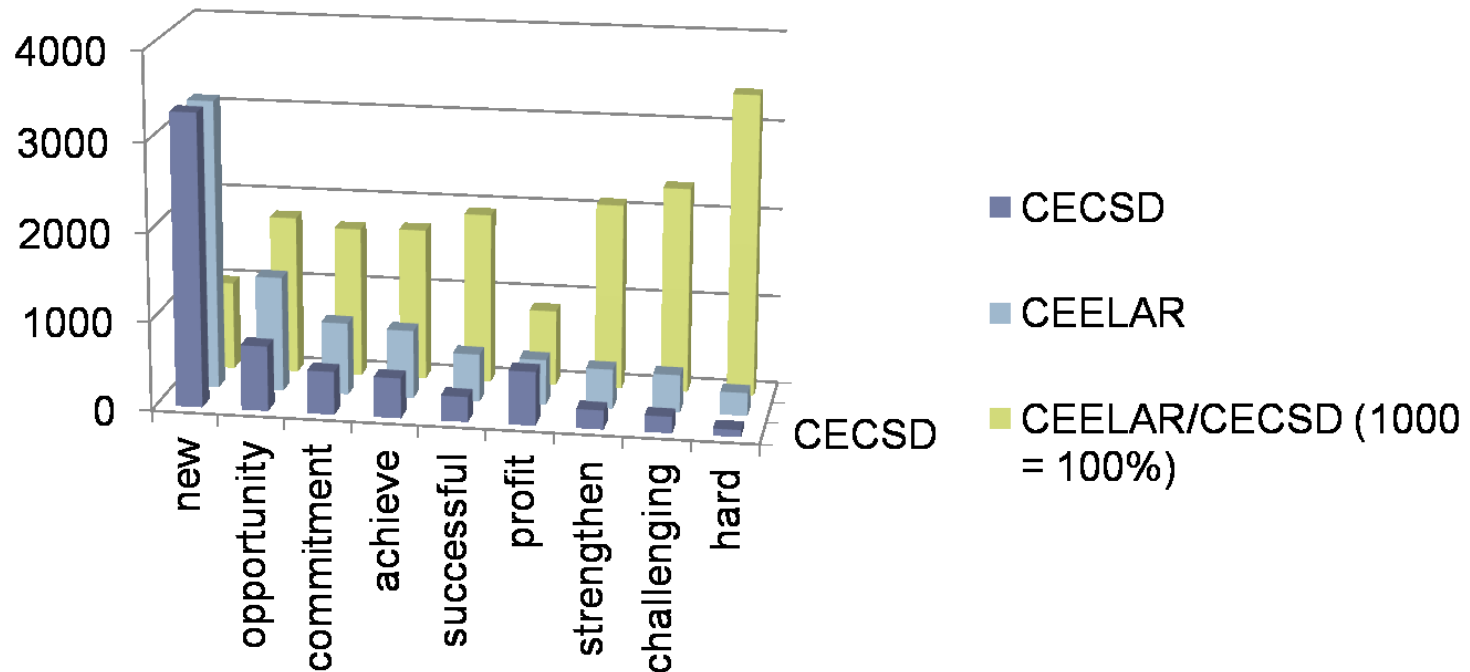
Tab. 2. Rates of occurrence of words with generally positive vs. words with generally negative connotations in the *Corpus of English executive letters in ARs (CEELAR)*, part of *CECSD*.

Words with positive/negative connotations – comparison of CEELAR and complete CECSD

Words with generally positive/negative connotations – comparison <i>CEELAR/CECSD</i>					
Word (<i>word class</i>)	Rate of occurrence in the complete <i>CECSD</i> (per 1 million)	Rate of occurrence in the <i>CEELAR</i> (per 1 million)	Difference in % (<i>CEELAR/CECSD</i>)	Position (<i>CEELAR/CECSD</i>)	Increase /decrease in ranking (<i>CEELAR/CECSD</i>)
new (<i>adj</i>)	3,297.58	3,257.25	98.8%	1/1	↓
opportunity (<i>n</i>)	726.97	1,293.66	178%	2/2	↑↑
profit (<i>n,v</i>)	599.56	508.22	84.8%	6/3	↓
commitment (<i>n</i>)	479.65	808.54	168.6%	3/4	↑↑
achieve (<i>v</i>)	446.7	762.34	170.7%	4/5	↑↑
effective (<i>adj</i>)	292.29	184.81	63.2%	8/6	↓
successful (<i>adj</i>)	277.30	531.33	191.6%	5/7	↑↑
innovative (<i>adj</i>)	232.33	115.51	49.7%	9/8	↓
strengthen (<i>adj</i>)	209.85	438.92	209.2%	7/9	↑↑↑
stable (<i>adj</i>)	142.40	69.3	48.7%	10/10	↓
professional/s	254.81	277.21	108.8%		↑
productive (<i>adj</i>)	89.93	161.71	179.8%		↑↑
care (<i>n,v</i>)	164.88	231.01	140.1%		↑
approve (<i>v</i>)	89.93	138.61	154.1%		↑
succeed (<i>v</i>)	44.97	138.61	308.2%		↑↑
loss (<i>n</i>)	749.45	161.71	21.6%		↓↓↓
old (<i>adj</i>)	104.92	23.1	22%		↓↓↓
challenging (<i>adj</i>)	179.87	415.82	231.2%		↑↑↑
difficult (<i>adj</i>)	82.44	138.61	168.1%		↑↑
hard (<i>adj</i>)	74.95	254.11	339%		↑↑↑

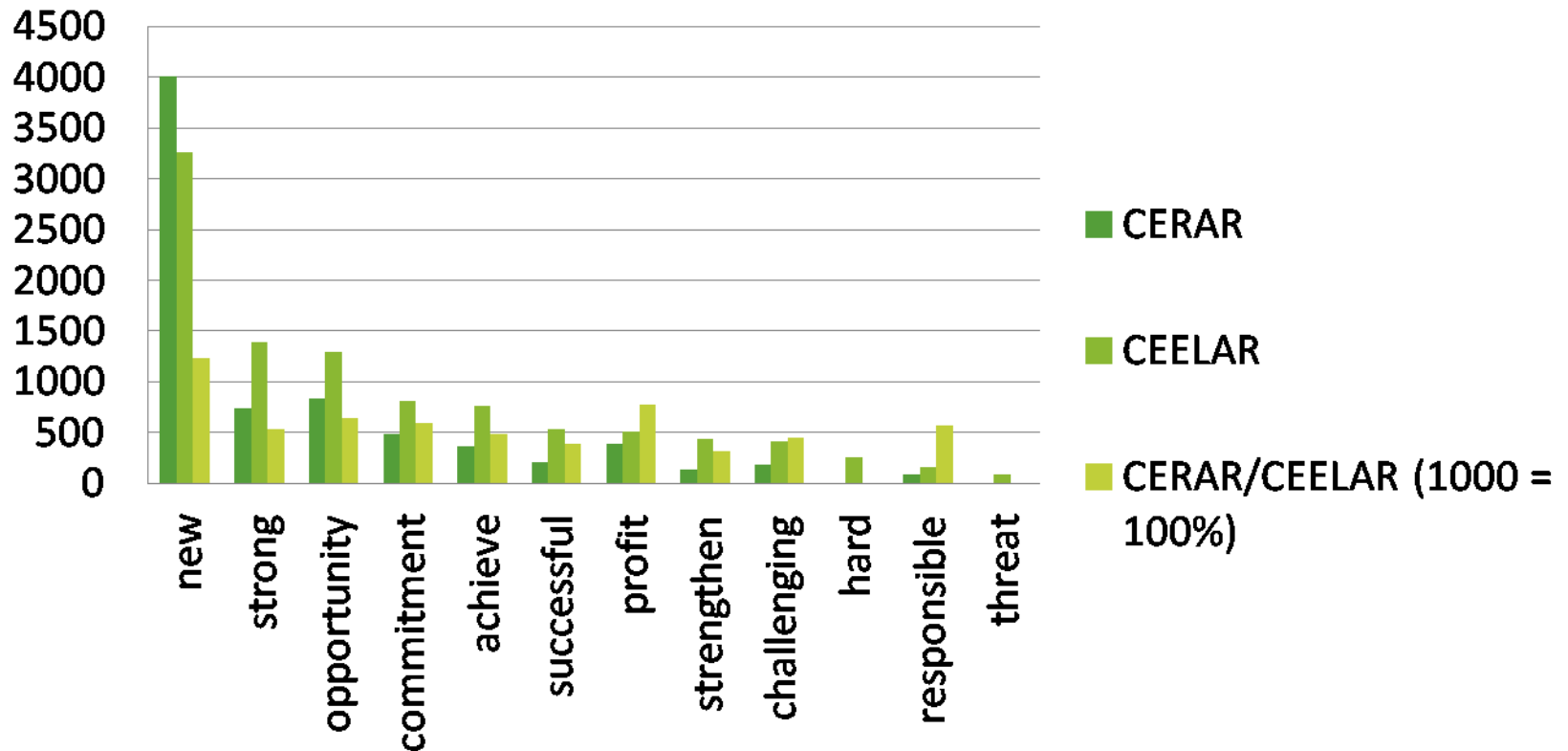
Tab. 3. Top ten positive and negative lexical words from both subcorpora, the complete English business subcorpus of *CECSD* and the *Corpus of English executive letters in ARs* (*CEELAR*). Several frequent words or “big movers” were added.

Comparison of frequency between CEELAR and CECSD (rate per million)



Comparison of frequency between **CERAR** (reviews, strategic reports) and **CEELAR** (letters/statements from executives)

Název grafu



Words preferred in letters from executives

- Words preferred in *CEELAR*:
- **new** (3,257.25/million), **opportunity** (1,293.66), **commitment** (808,54), **achieve** (762.34), **successful** (531.33), **profit** (508.22), **strengthen** (438.92), **challenging** (415.82).
- Doubtfully persuasive, added after frequency check (Word list): **continue** (2,356.31/million), **growth** (2,194.6), **development** (1,455.37), **strong** (1,386.07), **performance** (1,085.75).
- **Compared with complete CECSD:** **commitment** (808.54/million, 168.6%), **achieve** (762.34, 170.7%), **successful** (531.33, 191.6%), **strengthen** (438.92, 209.2%), **challenging** (415.82, 231.2%).

Words dispreferred and avoided

- Words dispreferred in *CEELAR*:
- **Absolutely:** poor (0), unsuccessful (0), ineffective (0), slowly (0), weaken (0), fail (0), old (23.1/million).
- **Compared with complete *CECSD*:** loss (161.71/million, 21.6%), old (23.1, 22%), stable (69.3, 48.7%).
- Words dispreferred in *CERAR*:
- **Absolutely:** fear (0), threaten (0), worry (1), crisis (1), competent (1), efficient (1)
- **Competent** and **efficient** – surprisingly avoided (too explicitly persuasive?)

Strategies of dealing with negative phenomena

- **Facing** vs. **relativising** the negative phenomena (Vogel 2018).
- **Avoidance** of words with negative connotations.
- Some apparently semantically negative words are used positively, e.g. by **negation**:
 - doc#5 CECSD been stepped up to a higher voltage to **avoid losses**. Finally, near the point
 - doc#5 CECSD distributed energy at scale with **low rates of loss**. With its software and
 - doc#1 CECSD **risk mitigation** in areas exposed to higher **threat** of financial crime and
 - doc#2 CECSD services like Windows Defender Advanced **Threat Protection**. Our belief in
 - doc#1 CECSD interest rates, which would **benefit** HSBC's **conservative balance sheet structure**.
 - doc#8 CERAR platform or device **without having to worry** about the underlying infrastructure.
 - doc#8 CERAR with the **historic highs** of the post-financial **crisis** years. 2016/2017 was

Frequency and rank of words in the *CEELAR* and *CECSD* corpora

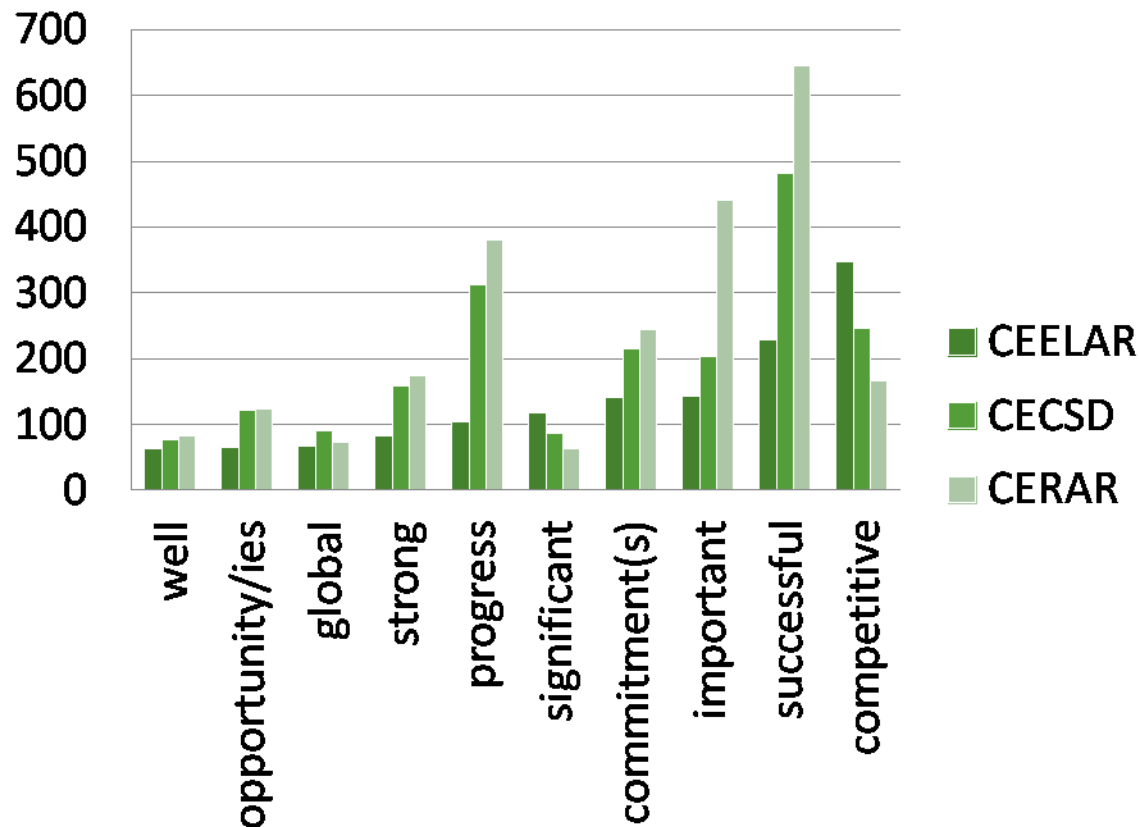
▶ *CECSD* (complete English business corpus)

- ▶ 2,951 items, total freq. 103,609
- ▶ 1. the (6,848)
- ▶ 2. and (4,896)
- ▶ 19. Company (530)
- ▶ 24. new (410)
- ▶ 28. business (371)
- ▶ 57. growth (192)
- ▶ 58. value (181)
- ▶ 65. development (158)
- ▶ 66. performance (158)
- ▶ 70. future (155)
- ▶ 86. significant (130)
- ▶ 94. increase (114)
- ▶ 122. continue (95)
- ▶ 124. support (94)

▶ *CEELAR* (subcorpus of letters from executives in ARs)

- ▶ 1,196 items, total freq. 31,224
- ▶ 1. the (2,398)
- ▶ 2. of (1,471)
- ▶ 12. Board (319)
- ▶ 21. business (158)
- ▶ 31. new (137)
- ▶ 41. growth (94)
- ▶ 61. future (62)
- ▶ 64. well (56)
- ▶ 69. continue (54)
- ▶ 82. strong (47)
- ▶ 84. development (46)
- ▶ 86. performance (45)
- ▶ 104. progress (40)
- ▶ 118. significant (37)

Position by frequency (1 = most frequent)



Persuasively used words – identification by rank in the Word list

Frequency in CECSD (CERAR) << CEELAR → used rather persuasively (*successful, progress, important*)

Frequency in CECSD (CERAR) > CEELAR → used rather generally or as terms (*significant, competitive; profit, effective, **loss**, stable*)

Negligible occurrence: *competent, efficient, optimistic, reliable, responsible, excellent, superb,...*

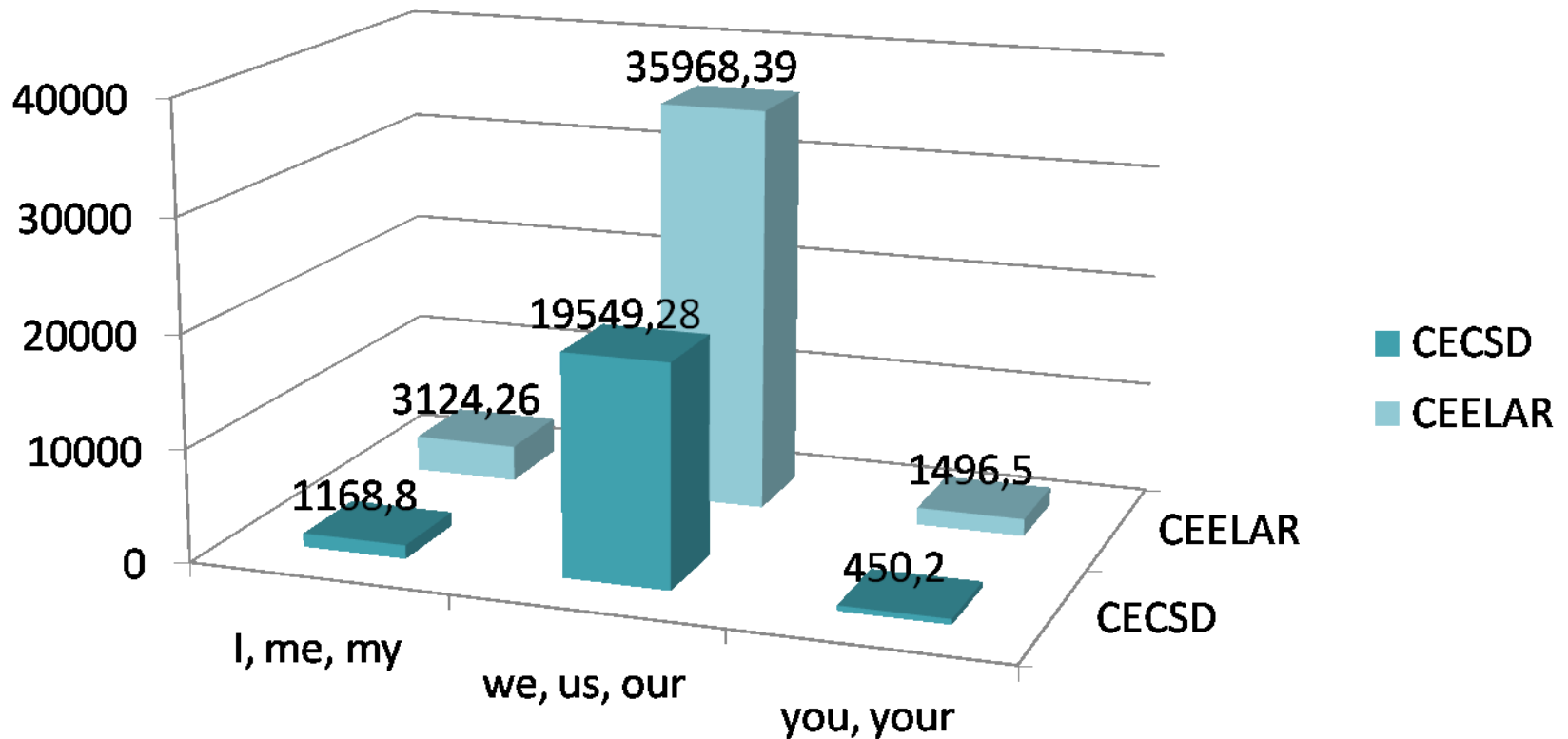
Words used mostly with positive connotations

- **doc#0** services that **enable growth and economic progress**. The Global Consumer Bank operates four
- **doc#6** in order to **ensure we made significant progress** across all key engineering programmes in 2016.
- **doc#6** feature in all Rolls-Royce aero engines. **Good progress strengthening** our aerospace aftermarket
- **doc#6** of the Airbus A330ceo to A330neo models are also **progressing well** and once the transition is completed we
- **doc#8** While we are still early in this process, **progress** across its five areas of focus **underpinned** a
- **doc#8** of categories to follow. The second key area of **progress** is how **we are evolving** our merchandising
- **doc#8** our processes globally. A **standout** area of **progress** here was our omni-channel programme, which has
- **doc#8** strategic priorities over time. With **work well progressed** for new digital tools that will **improve** how we
- **doc#8** of the Burberry Foundation. **Encouraged by this progress** and with the appetite to do much more, we
- **doc#9** D&I and assume accountability for **continuous progress**. We believe that diverse teams led by inclusive
- **doc#10** support to our Upstream earnings as the year **progressed**. This again **shows the strength** of the
- **doc#10** I am confident that 2017 will be **another year of progress** in building our **world-class** investment case.
- **doc#11** necessary work programmes. We **look forward to progress** being made on Article 6 in particular, which has
- **doc#13** income. As you can see, Bayer is making **good progress** in every respect. However, we need a reliable
- **doc#14** file with a summary of the **U.N. Global Compact Progress Report** based on the criteria of the Blueprint

Words used equivocally (**term** vs. **persuader**)

- **doc#2** partners were unable to meet their production **commitments**. The Company's manufacturing purchase
- **doc#2** Financial Statements in Note 10, "**Commitments** and Contingencies." Business Seasonality and
- **doc#2** the effective management of purchase **commitments** and inventory levels in line with anticipated
- **doc#2** and other asset risk in addition to purchase **commitment** cancellation risk. The Company records a
- **doc#2** or products, or not fully utilize firm purchase **commitments**. Future operating results depend upon the
- **doc#2** to require a substantial investment and **commitment** of resources and are subject to numerous risks
- **doc#2** has entered into substantial operating lease **commitments** for retail space. Certain stores have been
- **doc#3** new hardware designs for Windows 10; our own **commitment** to the health and profitability of our
- **doc#3** technology trends, we maintain our long-term **commitment** to research and development across a wide
- **doc#6** UltraFan engine technology. Supporting our **commitment** to research and development, we also announced
- **doc#8** prospects for the business and its ongoing **commitment** to maintaining a strong balance sheet with
- **doc#8** highlight under Inspired People is our wider **commitment** to the places and communities where we live and
- **doc#9** engagement: the degree of affiliation and **commitment** to Shell. It provides insights into employees,
- **doc#12** FY16. <GRAPH> <IMAGE> Taxes We have a strong **commitment** to manage our operations in a responsible way
- **doc#13** constellation at the start of last year, for its **commitment** to the company. Creating an integrated
- **doc#13** and all our employees, who displayed great **commitment** and personal dedication in making 2016 another
- **doc#13** we do. It is their creativity, knowledge and **commitment** which shape Bayer's performance ability. We
- **doc#13** through our wide-ranging humanitarian **commitment** and social sponsorship activities. One

Credibility-boosting by increased



Linguistic and non-linguistic means enhancing credibility in persuasive texts (→ validity claims, Habermas 1984)

- **Truth:** facts and evidence (graphs, tables, statistics, pictures), explicit authorship, information about source (authors → management, their qualifications)
- **Sincerity:** usage of 1st and 2nd person (personality), availability (sharing) of information, explanation
- **Appropriateness:** visual means of presentation, positive language, friendly tone, focus on reader's preferences and expectations
- **Understandability:** clear and logical layout, visuals, figures, examples, lower lexical density and fewer terms (executive letters vs. reviews etc.)
- **ETHOS PATHOS LOGOS**
- Credibility is not exclusively enhanced by means of PATHOS.

Conclusions

- Credibility is supported **materially** (evidence/facts, attractive presentation), **linguistically implicitly** (preference of positive, minimisation of negative topics; trustworthiness/sincerity/competence of the source) and **linguistically explicitly** (lexical choices).
- **Preference of lexis with positive** (→ implicit persuasive power) and **dispreference or avoidance of lexis with negative connotations**.
- Implicit appeal on the audience: their preferred attitudes and values are **strengthened** by assessment of their **relevance** for the company, which increases credibility.
- Credibility is enhanced by a variety of means (**overlap** between **ethos**, **logos** and **pathos**; credibility is not a function of pathos only).

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